

SAINT AUGUSTINE'S CITY OF GOD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Nigerian nation is in a monumental crisis – a crisis of utter threat to her existence, engendered by incompetent and insensitive leadership challenges, triggering a climate of insecurity, insurgency, terrorism, kidnapping, hunger and malnutrition, squalor and diseases, illiteracy and ethnic rivalry. When the Roman Empire faced a similar or even worse scenario occasioned by the Vandal onslaught that led to the fall of the Empire, people faced a similar situation. Then, Saint Augustine rose up to the challenge and provided answers based on the eternal realities of history as contained in his classical work “City of God.” The Nigerian has, however, not been able to replicate what Saint Augustine did for the ailing Roman Empire by providing succour to the myriads of problems facing the country. This Seminar Paper adopted two approaches in its methodology: the Historical and Phenomenological methodologies. The historical methodology was used to gather the historical evidence, and the phenomenological method was used to analyse it. The research found that though the church in Nigeria has been making some efforts to deal with the multiplicity of problems facing the country, the methods adopted have not yielded the desired results. The paper concludes that the church has fallen short of its divine mandate as a light and salt in the world and, therefore, recommends that the church go back and reevaluate its mission mandate to make it contemporarily relevant and a blessing to the nation.

Keywords: Saint Augustine, Church, Pastors, City of God, Nigeria.

Introduction

One of the problems that mankind has been battling with since the dawn of recorded history is the cataclysmic and sudden catastrophic changes that occur from time to time. The most notable of these is the biblical flood of Noah recorded in Genesis chapters 6-8. Science postulates that the universe came into existence through the Big Bang- a supposedly chaotic and destructive event. Another equally catastrophic event was the Babylonian captivity of Judah, which was witnessed by the prophet Jeremiah and which occasioned his writing of the Lamentations.

Tragedies come in various shapes and sizes, from minor incidents in the lives of individuals to national and even global catastrophes. For this reason, reactions to it/them vary. Tragedies also come at various times – some predictable and some unpredictable. Another salient feature of calamities is that some are induced by human beings (the flood of Noah and the Babylonian captivity were self-inflicted), while others are caused by events beyond the realm of mortals (earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are beyond human control).

The effects of such tragedies range from minor psychological hiccups and lacerations in personal, family, and community lives to social dislocations in national and international affairs. Some disasters led to massive deaths, enslavement of many people, and deportations. Some change how people live their lives, while others change laws, customs and traditions. People react to tragedies in various ways – from minor physical and psychological scars to major upheavals.

A classic example of a response to tragedy was Saint Augustine in his famous book. “The City of God.” Tragic as the fall of Rome was, this book has offered illumination to mankind in times of upheavals for

the past two millennia. Consequently, this seminar paper has sought to use Augustine's example to encourage the church in Nigeria to provide hope for Nigerians in general and the church in particular in this era of socioeconomic, political and spiritual upheavals.

Saint Augustine's Background

Augustine of Hippo, also known as Saint Augustine, Saint Austin (The American College Heritage Dictionary 91), Blessed Augustine or the Doctor of Grace (Portale 86)¹ was born in 354 AD in the municipium of Thagaste (now Souk Ahras, Algeria) in the Roman province of Numidia. His mother, Monica or Monnica, was a devout Christian; his father, Patricius, was a pagan who converted to Christianity on his deathbed. He had a brother named Navigius and a sister whose name is lost but is conventionally remembered as Perpetua (Bonner 2)². Scholars generally agree that Augustine's family were Berbers, an ethnic group indigenous to North Africa, but were heavily Romanised. Therefore, Augustine's first language was probably Latin (Power 353, 354).³

Augustine schooled in Thagaste, Madaurus (now M'Daourouch), and Carthage. While he was a student in Carthage, he read Cicero's dialogue *Hortensius* (now lost), which he described as leaving a lasting impression, kindling in his heart the love of wisdom and a great thirst for truth. It started his interest in philosophy. Although raised Christian, Augustine became a Manichaean, much to his mother's chagrin (Pope 128).⁴ He also had an illicit relationship that resulted in a son named Adeodatus (Ranke-Heineman 201,⁵ Boyce 57,⁶ Confessions 4.2).⁷ After a teaching stint at Thagaste, Augustine moved to Carthage, and went to Rome from Carthage. Through the help of some Manichaean friends, Augustine secured a teaching job at the imperial court of Milan (Portale 118).⁸

Augustine was very much influenced by Ambrose, even more than by his mother and others he admired. In his Confessions, Augustine states, "That man of God received me as a father would, and welcomed my coming as a good bishop should." Ambrose adopted Augustine as a spiritual son after the death of Augustine's father (BeDuhn 163).⁹ In late August of 386, at the age of 31, having heard of Ponticianus's and his friends' first reading of the life of Anthony of the Desert, Augustine converted to Christianity. Ambrose baptised him and his son Adeodatus in Milan on Easter Vigil, 24-25 April 387 (Wilson 204).¹⁰ In 391, Augustine was ordained a priest in Hippo Regius (now Annaba), in Algeria.

In 395, he was made coadjutor Bishop of Hippo and became full Bishop shortly thereafter, hence the name "Augustine of Hippo." He remained in that position until his death in 430. Bishops were the only individuals allowed to preach when he was alive. He scheduled time to preach after being ordained despite a busy schedule of preparing sermons and preaching at other churches besides his own (Chadwick 14).¹¹ When serving as the Bishop of Hippo, his goal was to minister to individuals in his congregation, and he would choose the passages that the church planned to read every week.

Works

Augustine was one of the most prolific Latin authors in terms of surviving works, and the list of his works consists of more than one hundred separate titles (Possidius 43).¹² They include apologetic works against the heresies of the Arians, Donatists, Manichaeans and Pelagians; texts on Christian doctrine, notably *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Doctrine); exegetical works such as commentaries on Genesis, the Psalms and Paul's Letter to the Romans; many sermons and letters; and the *Retractationes*, a review of his earlier works which he wrote near the end of his life.

Apart from those, Augustine is probably best known for his Confessions, which is a personal account of his earlier life, and for *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God, consisting of 22 books), which he wrote to restore the confidence of his fellow Christians, which was badly shaken by the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410. His "On the Trinity", in which he developed what has become known as the 'psychological analogy of the Trinity, is also considered to be among his masterpieces and arguably of more doctrinal importance than the Confessions or the City of God ((Brown 117).¹³ He also wrote On

Free Choice of the Will (*De libero arbitrio*), addressing why God gives humans free will that can be used for evil.

Legacy

In his philosophical and theological reasoning, Augustine was greatly influenced by Stoicism, Platonism and Neoplatonism, particularly by the work of Plotinus, author of the *Enneads*, probably through the mediation of Porphyry and Victorinus. Some Neoplatonic concepts remain visible in Augustine's early writings (Russell 236).¹⁴ His early and influential writing on the human will, a central topic in ethics, would become a focus for later philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. He was also influenced by the works of Virgil (known for his teaching on language), and Cicero (known for his teaching on argument) (Farrell 265-296).¹⁵

Augustine's Response to the Fall of Rome (The City of God)

In AD 410, a pivotal moment in Western history, the Vandals, under the command of their king, Alaric, captured the city of Rome. Rome was known as the Eternal City. The Romans had thought that it would never fall, and the year 410 shook this belief to its foundations and ultimately led to the collapse of the Roman Empire. The world itself seems to have been destroyed. The fall of Rome brought about social dislocation in the general populace.

Merchants faced invasions from both land and sea. Businesses collapsed (Ferguson 208).¹⁶ The breakdown of trade destroyed Europe's cities as centres of commerce and money became scarce. As a result, cities were abandoned, and the nobles retreated to rural areas as the cities collapsed. The Germanic invaders who stormed Rome were illiterates, so learning was heavily curbed. This is in addition to the general insecurity, despair and hopelessness that usually accompany such situations.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, ethnic chiefs and kings, ex-Roman governors, warlords, peasant leaders and bandits carved up the former Roman provinces into feudal kingdoms. Peasants were assigned permanently to manorial estates (Brown 117).¹⁷ They provided food for the aristocrats in exchange for protection from bandits. Everyone sought answers about what to do and what to believe in. Those who adhered to the waning pagan faith were quick to blame the Christians, claiming that the gods had abandoned Rome because many Romans had forsaken them and taken the new faith. These Romans claimed Christians were not patriotic enough because they asked people to serve God rather than the state and advocated forgiveness toward enemies.

More importantly, they said the Christian God had failed to protect Rome, as He should have done since Constantine declared him the only true God. The angry wranglings prompted Augustine to start writing *The City of God* in 413. Augustine created a theology of the self in *The Confessions*, and in *The City of God*, he initiated a theology of history. He uncovers a wide-ranging explanation of history that begins with creation itself, moves through the turmoil and upheaval of man-made states (the City of the World), and continues to the realisation of the kingdom of God (the City of God).

In effect, *The City of God* is a completion of the project he began in *The Confessions*, where he traced the progress of the self toward completion in God. Likewise, human society finds completion in the realm of God. Along with a theology of history, Augustine seeks to put together a Christian philosophy of society. In other words, he gives the various areas of philosophical inquiry, such as ethics and politics, a unity in the universality of divine revelation. History completes itself in divine law. The philosophers of the past, such as Plato, had all said that a person does not owe complete and absolute loyalty to any earthly society. Augustine vigorously critiques this concept in the light of Christian doctrine. He states that the Scriptures alone can instruct human beings about the highest good and the highest evil and that human endeavour has no purpose without this guidance.

Augustine presents the four essential elements of his philosophy in *The City of God*: the Church, the State, the City of Heaven, and the City of the World. The church is divinely established and leads

humankind to eternal goodness, which is God. The state adheres to the virtues of politics and the mind, formulating a political community. Both of these societies are visible and seek to do good. Mirroring these are two invisible societies: the City of Heaven, for those predestined for salvation, and the City of the World, for those given eternal damnation. This grand design allows Augustine to elaborate his theory of justice, which he says issues from the proper and just sharing of those things necessary for life. The City of God is a challenge to human society to choose which city it wishes to be a part of, and Augustine sees his task as clearly marking out the parameters of each choice. Augustine concludes that the purpose of history is to show the unfolding of God's plan, which involves fostering the City of Heaven and filling it with worthy citizens. For this purpose, God initiated all of creation itself. In such a grand plan, the fall of Rome is insignificant.

The Contents of the City of God

This monumental work consists of twenty-two books. The first ten books of *The City of God*, which make up the first part of the work, refute the pagans' charges that Christians brought about the fall of Rome. The first five books deal with the pagan belief that people must worship the old gods to achieve material advantages in this world, including the continuation of the Roman Empire and the supremacy of Rome. In Book I, Augustine attacks the pagans, who claim that Rome fell because the Christian religion had weakened it, and he stresses that misfortune happens to everyone. In Book II, he demonstrates that the fall of Rome is not a unique event in human history. The Romans suffered calamities before, even when the old gods were being actively worshipped, and those gods did nothing to prevent those calamities from happening. He suggests Romans became weak because of these gods since they gave themselves up to moral and spiritual corruption. In Book III, Augustine continues discussing catastrophes that occurred in pagan times to prove further that Christianity did not cause Rome to fall. To drive home his point, he asks again why the old gods did not defend Rome in the past (*City of God* 386).¹⁸

In Book IV, Augustine suggests an alternative view. Rome endured for many centuries because it was the will of the true God, and its survival had nothing to do with pagan gods such as Jove, who behaved only in the lowest manner. In Book V, Augustine addresses the pagan notion of fate, which many people saw as a viable force that had held the Roman Empire together. Instead, says Augustine, the Romans of ancient times were virtuous, and God rewarded that virtue, even though they did not worship him. When he reaches Book VI, Augustine shifts focus and devotes the next five books to refuting those who said people must worship the old gods to gain eternal life. Augustine uses pagan authors to destroy this notion by saying that the gods were never held in high regard, so all the old ways, myths, and laws are useless in ensuring eternal happiness. This piecemeal destruction of pagan theology continues through Book X.

Book XI begins the second part of *The City of God*, where Augustine describes the doctrine of the two cities, one earthly and one heavenly. In the next three books, he details how these two cities came about based on his reading of the Bible. The next four Books explain the prehistory of the city of heaven, from Genesis to the age of Solomon, whose story is allegorised as Christ and the church. In book XVII, Augustine undertakes a similar process of portraying the prehistory of the city of the world, from Abraham to the Old Testament prophets. Augustine focuses on how the two cities will end in book XIX, and in the process, he outlines the nature of the supreme good. He emphasises that the peace and happiness found in the heavenly city can also be experienced here on earth. Book XX deals with the Last Judgment and the evidence found for it in the Bible. Augustine continues this theme in Book XXI and describes the eternal punishment of the damned, arguing that it is not a myth. The final book, book XXII, tells of the end of the city of God, after which the saved will be given eternal happiness and become immortal.

The Relevance of the City of God to the Contemporary Church in Nigeria

Just like Augustine responded to the crisis in his day with a theocentric approach, the church in Nigeria should rise to the occasion by providing godly and biblocentric solutions to the ills plaguing the country. The church should adopt two approaches in doing this:

By ministering to its own Constituency

Many people are hurting in the church. People are buffeted right, left and centre. Christians are traumatised by the devil, world system, and socioeconomic problems. Christians are suffering from diseases and oppression. All these induce some emotional traumas. And as Hill and Hill posit: "Emotional health relates to every human being. No one has a perfect life. You have probably, like everyone else, been misunderstood, been in conflict of love, experienced acceptance or rejection, and suffered loss, including bereavement (23-32).¹⁹ Augustine observed in the city of God that: "Though good and bad men suffer alike, we must not suppose that there is no difference between the men (<https://bookroo.com>). This is to show that no one is immune to the vicissitudes of life. No one is free from pain. No one is exempted from life's bashing. This is where the church should come in, and, as members of the family of God, should act as one another's keeper. As Hill and Hill further observed: "To admit our common woundedness would help us to affirm our common humanity and deep awareness would enable us to see through and to reach across the borderlines and division with which we seek to maintain and stabilise our identities" (Hill and Hill 50).²⁰ The Bible is rich on account of hospitality and encouragement towards its practice. "When we open to the account of the widow of Zarephat and Elijah (1 Kings 17), we cannot miss the blessing and mystery accompanying the practice. The gracious ministry of the Messiah is summed up in Jesus' famous sermon in Nazareth:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19) (Pohl 43).²¹

Leupold observes from this passage that: In an ecstatic gush of eloquent terms, the multiplicity of tasks that fall to the Messiah's lot are recited, all of them flowing from, and growing out of the fact that a generous anointing has been bestowed upon Him (320).²² The Christian response to crisis and afflictions plaguing members of the household of God flows from Christ's person and mission. Christians are to be one another's keepers. They are a community of people where the welfare of one is the welfare of others and vice-versa.

Ministering to those Outside the Faith

The church's constituency is the whole inhabited earth. The church and, by extension, Christians of every age stand as a mediating voice, an arbiter and a prophetic voice to its generation. It stands between two great divides – the divine and the human, the heavenly and the earthly, the secular and the sacred. Beyond this, it has been endowed with certain charismata unavailable to any other group.

So, when disasters occur, the church should rise to the occasion as Saint Augustine did. Stevenson observed that Augustine's City of God was rooted in the evils of his time (230).²³ Nigeria may not be facing calamities up to the extent of Rome at the twilight of its glory, but it is, nevertheless, faced with many problems and many people are giving up. According to Nyiawung:

The cry of misery, oppression and injustice has not left African society indifferent and insensitive; the call for social reform has been sounded by various agents through a variety of methods. The plethora of these agents and the several approaches that have been deployed are a cause of concern about the place of prophetic witness in the

process of re-establishing human dignity as ordained by God and translated in Jesus words: "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10) (10).²⁴

There is a need to direct the church's attention towards the public and its cries for help. The church can no longer afford to stand Akimbo while Nigeria is on fire. The church should act as a prophetic voice. Being a prophetic voice is God authorising a voice to speak on His behalf. Prophetic voicing should not be reduced to the ordained ministry of the clergy but to that of the whole body of Christ, for there is an absolute genetic spiritual link between Old Testament prophets and all believers. Therefore, the duty of being a prophetic voice is that of every believer (Williams 171).²⁵ It applies to every believer who has a burning desire to defend the cause of God. One of the most important duties of the prophets in the Old Testament was to deliver God's message as ambassadors. Today, the Holy Spirit has endowed each believer with the inspiration to speak in his name. This does not make the believer a social crusader.

Augustine wasn't a social crusader in the strict sense of the word. But he provided answers to the burning questions of his day. A prophetic voice meditates between scripture and the society. It is a medium that calls into question the arrogant complacency of the people of God who still recite and celebrate the great acts of God in the past but who do not live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Milgore 117).²⁶ Augustine asked a rhetorical question in the City of God: "Justice being taken away, then what are kingdoms but great robberies? For what are robberies but little kingdoms? (<https://goodread.com>). The church has a mandate to point to earthly rulers where they are going wrong. There are three modes of addressing public issues currently in Nigeria, viz:

1. The classical methods which use written documents or the media.
2. The revolutionary method, which can either be verbal or written and is used by activists (political or social) in order to react against a decision or make a request from leaders (for example, strikes and raids).
3. The prophetic mode as a confessional style makes use of biblical imagery and visionary language to address situations (Nyirawung 2).²⁷

The researcher's concern is the ecclesial-prophetic angle. It is a kingdom of God theology that, according to Moltman: "Intervenes critically and prophetically to the needs of the public affairs of a given society, and draws public attention, not to the church's interest, but to God's kingdom, God's commandments and his righteousness (xx).²⁸ Thus, the church in Nigeria should aim to provide divinely ordained answers to the needs of the public.

Some Contemporary Approaches of Nigerian Churches to Public Issues

Churches use a variety of approaches to address the public. Three modes were used in the Old Testament: Oral utterances (cf. Samuel, Elijah and Elisha), the written word and symbolic acts (1 Ki. 11:29; 2 Ki 2:13; 1 Sam. 10:2-10; Jer. 19:11; Ezr 4:9-17; 5:1-4). Today, several modes abound, facilitated by developments in science, for example, preaching and crusades (oral utterances), declarations and publications (the written word), the media and choral singing (written and oral), social activities of the church and the behaviour of its personnel (symbolic acts) and prayer (spiritual acts).

Currently, crusades have become the most popular way of attracting public attention. Yet, effective and genuine crusades are those which focus on the nourishment of God's people with scripture. In secular democratic states where there is religious freedom, the clergy holds an authoritative voice in public. Unlike the written word, oral utterances sometimes meet a wider target in Africa.

Through declarations and publications, the church's prophetic witness is not only documented but preserved for reference and posterity, allowing this approach to serve a wider audience. In Cameroon, for instance, it is the tradition of the churches to make their respective positions clear with reference to certain political decisions. Choral singing has also been identified as an important mode of public

communication and serves the purpose of praise, consolation, and evangelisation. The symbolic acts of the church are carried out through its social arms: hospitals, schools, handicraft centres, agricultural services, et cetera. Through these services, the church symbolically offers an alternative treatment through employment, care and benevolent services.

Another dimension of symbolic acts is the behaviour of the clergy. In public, the prophet's attitude often speaks louder than his utterances. Being prophetic voices is not only for those who have 'ears to hear' but also for those who have 'eyes to see'. As a 'public book', the prophet lives a public and social life that also communicates a message.

In order to strengthen the spirituality of its members, many churches have formed spiritual groups within their respective settings. These groups witness to themselves and the public through educational, developmental and transformative activities. In like manner, the church has the most potent weapon capable of hypnotising all evil - prayer. Church ministers have often been granted the opportunity to offer prayers during public activities, which are opportunities to communicate God's voice.

De Gruchy opines that the church's prophetic role requires that it maintains a critical distance from both political and civil society and refuses to be co-opted. To maintain a critical detachment is wiser than to abstain from permeating government decisions (87).²⁹ By accepting neutral cooperation, the church gains opportunities to sound its prophetic voice. The church is called upon to be a watchman for society; hence, it cannot distance itself from societal concerns and only wait in order to warn and bring criticism at the end. Even when the clergy's role has often been reduced to prayer-making, this role provides an excellent opportunity to maximise its ministry. It is an opportunity to say prayerfully aloud what would not have been said otherwise in normal circumstances.

Given its divine role, the church is well-placed to participate and intervene in societal issues without necessarily being at the forefront. For instance, the empowerment it offers through its social services, coupled with its public denouncements, cannot be underestimated. In this sense, prophetic voice can be evaluated in terms of its moral effect, pedagogic influence and transforming power within the society.

Conclusion

Nigeria, with its growing assortment of problems - socioeconomic, political, religious, security and insurgency challenges has imposed on the Nigerian church an awesome responsibility. The church stands on a pedestal to point out the path to the only eternal reality. Though the church cannot claim the monopoly of understanding and defining, it does offer a response to a universal truth that represents society's true nature and its highest good. Esler is right that the significance of religious contributions to circumstances is likely greater if one's religion involves an acceptance of its detailed involvement in all aspects of modern life, political and economic included.

However, there is a need for the Nigerian church to rid itself of all manner of corrupt practices if her prophetic declarations are to be taken seriously. Saint Augustine lived a pious life beyond reproach and, had the moral authority to make pronouncements, and was taken seriously. Nigerian church pastors should wean themselves of the quest for pecuniary gains, the quest for power and all forms of unhealthy rivalry. As corporate individuals, their responsibilities are multi-dimensional. They represent God in the public space. As with the prophets of old, they are expected to be society's counsellors and guides to governing structures. Nigerian pastors and, by extension, Nigerian churches must realise that what the society wants to see is whether what the church has is better than what they have.

For this reason, Nigerian pastors need a new orientation based on education, reformation and empowerment. They need to shift from a passive and isolatory kind of ministry to an inclusive and participatory one, which builds an intimate relationship between theology and the society. Nigerian pastors must, therefore, become a theological reflection on the relationship between salvation and the condition of misery imposed by the existential realities of the Nigerian state.

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